

A Different Path: Into Darkness, Unafraid

by PrettyFrog

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Summary: Once upon a time, a mage rose from the Sacred Ashes and saved the world. But with a small twist in time, things could have gone another way entirely... A fierce Dalish hunter finds herself thrust into the heart of the Chantry. A sword, a shield, a marked handâ€¦ Legends have been born out of less.

1. Chapter 1

"I call." Sulana tossed another coin into the pile.

The dwarven woman narrowed her eyes. "Yesterday, you didn't even know how to play this game."

"I'm a fast learner." Sulana grinned, and took a drink from the mug next to her.

Bridget chuckled, and laid her cards down. "Three staves."

"Not bad." Sulana shrugged. "But they don't beat three dragons." She set her own hand down.

"Dammit." Bridget leaned back in her chair. "Thought I had your tells. Too used to playing with civilized elves." She narrowed her eyes. "You're hustling me."

"You started it." Sulana chuckled, and swept her winnings into a woven pouch. "So which way do you think the wind is blowing?"

"Too soon to say." Bridget shrugged. "My money is on a lot of false promises and about half the mages going back to their towers."

"As many as that?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Once you've tasted free air, kind of hard to accept getting the

shaft again." Bridget shrugged. "That why you're here? Trying to figure out how many refugees your folks are going to be getting?"

"Events here are going to affect the world." Sulana shuffled the deck. "And one there is one constant in Thedas. Sooner or later, every piece of shit lands on the elves."

"So..." Bridget picked up her cards, and took a look at them. "I get the feeling you aren't in a big hurry to get back to the Free Marches when this is done."

"Never really cared much for sea travel." Sulana took a drink from her mug.

"Well, happens I belong to an outfit that could always use some good scouts." The dwarven woman's eyes flicked to the sword at Sulana's side. "And some good blades."

She peered at Bridget from over the mug. Smuggling as an alternative career to walking aimlessly through the woods. The idea had a little merit. "I'll keep that in mind."

#

The templar groaned as he sat up and rubbed his head. One of those watching laughed. "That's two falls out of three, Ser Cadmus."

"Maker's breath." The man got slowly back to his feet, and looked across the makeshift combat ring at Sulana. "Pay the blasted knife-ear."

"Someone's a sore loser." Another of the observers called out.

Another man in templar armor handed Sulana a coinpurse. "I heard about the Dalish fighting during the Blight. Were you one of them?"

Sulana shook her head. "No. Was a bit too young to make that fight." She hefted the purse, then shrugged. "Buy you a drink?"

"Won't turn one down." He followed her to the tavern. "Maker, watching Cadmus get his ass handed to him by a Dalish girl of all things..." He chuckled as he sat down across from her. "He is never going to live that down. If the order weren't such a mess right now, I'd be trying to talk you into joining up, Dalish or no."

She grinned as she began questioning him on just what kind of mess the order was in at the moment.

#

Sulana raised an eyebrow when she saw Quiyala walking back up the trail with her companion. The muscular qunari man towered over the elven woman by a good couple of feet, and was definitely on the pretty side. The two of them were laughing about something. "Well now, Quiyala. Atta girl." She smirked. Vathran was going to shit himself.

She waited until the two parted ways before catching up to her friend. "So, your new friend got a brother?"

"Why do you..." Quiyala blinked then laughed and shook her head. "You're terrible."

"Find anything down at the camp?"

"Bits and pieces. You?"

"Lot of factions at play here, and everyone wants something." Sulana frowned. "Where does your friend come into play?"

"He and his mercenary band were hired as security. An attempt by the Divine at neutrality." Quiyala shook her head. "What about your drinking buddies?"

"The split from the Chantry isn't resting well with a lot of the templars." She brushed her hair back from her face. "They're used to thinking of themselves as the good guys."

"As opposed to we evil mages?" Quiyala chuckled.

"You did coat all my undergarments in ice." Sulana reached over and tugged Quiyala's brown hair playfully.

The other woman's smile was pure innocence. "I told you, Ferelden has freak weather patterns."

#

Vathran glared as Quiyala worked her healing magic on the bruises. Sulana ignored him. "I'm still not sure who this other faction is, but there are a significant number of templars among them."

"Mages as well." Quiyala nodded. "Though it seems like they are being led by a templar."

"Ex templar." Vathran spoke up and they both looked towards him. "He was the knight-captain of Kirkwall, of all places." He rolled his eyes when they both continued staring. "You two are not the only ones capable of learning things. And I managed that without getting into a fistfight or wandering aimlessly all over the mountain."

"Yeah, but you didn't have any fun." Sulana grinned. "I can tell. You aren't broken out in hives."

Quiyala snickered. "All right, I think you're good. You managed not to break any of your bones this time around."

"We aren't here to have fun. This is a very serious matter." Vathran gestured up at the Chantry. "The Chantry kept the templars in check. Do you really want rogue templars thinking they need to pay attention to the People?"

"We know how serious the situation is, Vathran." Quiyala kept her voice soothing. "That is why we are here. You get information your way, and Sulana gets it hers. That does give us a broader viewpoint than we would have otherwise." The First squared her shoulders. "I

suggest you both follow up on each other's leads and discover what else can be learned."

He started to open his mouth, and then sighed. "You're right. Sulana, see if you can determine how the templars feel about this ex knight-captain. It might tell us what angle the third faction is playing. Quiyala..."

"The third faction is reporting directly to the Divine herself. They are also the ones that hired the mercenaries providing security. I will determine what more I can learn." She started back towards the camp.

Sulana nearly laughed at the look on Vathran's face. "She's the First for a reason, Vathran. She found out that it was the Left Hand of the Divine that hired the mercenaries, and confirmed that the Left Hand is none other than Leliana. The Leliana." She felt a rush of excitement. "Warden Mahariel's Leliana."

"Could he be here?" Vathran turned towards her.

"Haven't heard yet." She rose. If he was, she was not going to pass up the opportunity to meet the first hero the Dalish had produced in centuries. "But it's enough of a lead that you might be able to finagle a chance to speak with her directly." Diplomacy, at least, was something he could handle.

"An interesting notion." He nodded.

#

"Yes."

Bridget glanced up at her. "Yes?" The dwarf's eyes widened. "Yes to the offer?"

"I can't make it official until the Conclave is done. I'm responsible for a couple people until then, but after -" Sulana cut off. "Did you hear something?"

"Someone shouting." Bridget nodded. "Which direction?"

"Not sure." Sulana tilted her head as she listened again. "Stupid place has too many echos."

"I'll go this way, you go that." Bridget headed off.

Sulana immediately went the other way.

#

Rubble.

Char.

Fire.

Soldiers?

Darkness.

#

She was sitting in a prison, her hands manacled, while a bunch of armored humans pointed swords at her. What the hell had been in that bottle, anyway? And her hand was glowing. It would have been interesting, if it didn't feel like she was picking up a hot coal every time it happened.

Two women entered. Both human. Both angry. One of them wore... Well now. A seeker. This day just kept getting better and better. The Seeker walked to stand behind her. "Tell me why we shouldn't kill you now. The conclave is destroyed. Everyone who attended is dead. Except for you."

That was... Sulana shook her head. No. That couldn't be... The fire and char had been a dream. A hazy nightmare. "All those people?"

Her wrist was grabbed and shaken. "Explain this."

For a moment, Sulana considered lunging forward and biting the hand that held hers. Perhaps something of that showed in her eyes, because the Seeker let her go. Before the questioning could get too much further, the other woman stepped in. "We need her, Cassandra."

Sulana tried to focus. She ran through the breathing exercise they'd shown her all those years ago, and she felt herself calming. "What happens now?"

More questions she couldn't answer. And then they were taking her to some forward camp. Outside, the Seeker - Cassandra - gestured at the sky. "We call it 'the Breach.' It's a massive rift into the world of demons that grows larger with each passing hour. It's not the only such rift. Just the largest. All were caused by the explosion at the conclave."

Pain shot up her hand again. She gritted her teeth, but a cry escaped her anyway as she fell to her knees. "Each time the Breach expands, your mark spreads..." Cassandra knelt beside her. "And it is killing you. It may be the key to stopping this, but there isn't much time."

Not much time. And she was dying. Cassandra was offering her a chance to do so in a way that might just matter. She looked back up at the Breach. "Alright." She stood, and nodded to Cassandra. "You've got a plan? Let's go."

#

People had been staring at her for days. She ignored them just as thoroughly now as she had then, and followed Cassandra from the town. They were halfway to the bridge when the pain in her hand again drove her to the ground.

Cassandra helped her back to her feet. "The pulses are coming faster now. The larger the Breach grows, the more rifts appear, the more demons we face."

#

Sulana sighed, and offered the sword to Cassandra hilt first. "Have it your way."

Cassandra sighed, and relented. "I cannot protect you, and I cannot expect you to be defenseless." She sheathed her own blade. "I should remember you agreed to come willingly."

Side by side they continued up the mountain. Sulana struck a demon with her shield, stunning it so that Cassandra could deal a mortal blow. A moment later, Cassandra copied the action, and Sulana ran a demon through. Something nagged at the back of Sulana's mind, and then she stopped in her tracks. "Cassandra."

The other woman stopped and raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Seeker Cassandra?" Sulana starred.

"Yes." Cassandra nodded.

Her mouth fell open. "By the Creators, you're Seeker Cassandra! Cassandra Pentaghast!" She smiled. "You fought alongside Warden Mahariel at the siege in Wildervale! And in the Nahashin Marshes!" She put a hand over her mouth. "Mythal enaste!"

Cassandra shifted her weight uncomfortably. "Yes, I..."

"What's he like?"

"He was -"

"Did he really kill a werewolf with his bare hands?"

"I'm not -"

"Did the two of you actually kill a dragon with a rockslide in the Blasted Hills?"

"We were -"

"Did you really fight a pride demon on the roof of the Antivan royal palace?"

"We never -"

"How many demons did you really face at Pointe Valiar?"

"There were -"

"Did he truly climb Fort Drakon?"

"Yes, he did that." Cassandra spoke quickly and then pointed up at the sky before Sulana could ask another question. "We should get moving."

"Right." Sulana turned and continued up the mountain, and tried to control the giddy feeling rising inside her. She was going into battle alongside Seeker Pentaghast.

"We're getting closer to the rift. You can hear the fighting."

Sulana nodded. "Who's fighting?"

"You'll see soon." Cassandra gestured for them to hurry. "We must help them."

#

Cassandra sheathed her blade and started for the staircase that led up the mountain. Behind her, she swore she heard the elven woman actually giggle. It was slightly disconcerting. They crested the rise to see the group of soldiers being sorely pressed. She wrinkled her nose when she noticed Varric in the thick of things. She exchanged a glance with the elven woman and they both charged.

Credit where it was due, whoever their prisoner was she could certainly fight. She moved in to back up the soldiers as though she'd been doing it her entire life.

No sooner had the last of the demons fallen than Solas grabbed the prisoner's wrist and pulled her to the rift.

#

They charged simultaneously, driving the demons back from the beleaguered soldiers. Quickly, the soldiers, as well as a mage and a dwarf with a crossbow, moved in to press the advantage.

As soon as the last demon had fallen, the mage grabbed Sulana's wrist. "Quickly, before more come through."

Something happened. Whether it was him, or her, or what, she couldn't say. But her hand felt like it was cramping and then the rift collapsed. She pulled her hand free. "What did you do?"

He nodded to her. "I did nothing. The credit is yours." He gestured at her hand.

"This thing." She stared down at the still faintly glowing mark. If it could close one rift... Maybe there was a chance after all.

"Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed that mark upon your hand." He straightened. "I theorized the mark might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach's wake - and it seems I was correct."

Cassandra walked over from where she'd been directing the soldiers to head back. "Meaning it could also close the Breach itself."

"Possibly." His gray eyes looked her over appraisingly. "It seems you hold the key to our salvation."

"Good to know. Here I thought we'd be ass-deep in demons forever." Sulana turned at the sound of the dwarf's voice. She'd almost forgotten about him. He smiled at her. "Varric Tethras: Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong."

"Nice to..." Sulana blinked. "Varric Tethras? The Varric Tethras?" A wide smile came to her face. "Did you and the Champion really..." Cassandra coughed, and Sulana swallowed the question. "Nice crossbow."

"Ah, isn't she? Bianca and I have been through a lot together."

"You named your crossbow Bianca?"

"Of course. And she'll be great company in the valley."

She started to nod, but Cassandra cut off any reply she would have made. "Absolutely not. Your help is appreciated, Varric, but..."

"Have you been in the valley lately, Seeker? Your soldiers aren't in control anymore. You need me."

"He's got a point." Sulana shrugged.

Cassandra made a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a growl before waving a hand in defeat.

"My name is Solas, if there are to be introductions. I am pleased to see you still live." The elven mage nodded to her. He was quite possibly the tallest elf she'd ever seen.

Varric shrugged. "He means, 'I kept that mark from killing you while you slept.'"

"Oh." She turned to him. "Thank you. Glad someone knows what is going on, cause I sure don't."

"Solas is an apostate, well versed in such matters." Cassandra nodded.

"Technically all mages are now apostates, Cassandra." He turned his eyes back to Sulana. "My travels have allowed me to learn much of the Fade, far beyond the experience of any Circle mage. I came to offer whatever help I can give with the Breach. If it is not closed, we are all doomed, regardless of origin."

She blinked. He'd willingly turned himself in. "And what will you do once this is over?"

"One hopes those in power will remember who helped and who did not." He looked over her shoulder at Cassandra. "Cassandra, you should know: the magic involved here is unlike any I have seen. Your prisoner is no mage. Indeed, I find it difficult to imagine any mage having such power."

"Understood." Cassandra gestured. "We must get to the forward camp quickly."

"Well, Bianca's excited." Varric started after Cassandra.

Sulana grinned. Bianca wasn't the only one.

#

They had to deal with another rift on their way to the forward camp. This time, Sulana managed to seal the rift on her own. It was odd, feeling magic flowing through her. Quiyala would... She stopped, and turned her gaze up to the mountain before shaking her head. No. Quiyala and Vathran had to have been outside the temple. Right?

#

In the middle of the bridge, Leliana stood arguing with a man in Chantry robes. It took an act of will not to run up and start firing questions at the woman. The Chantry man glared when he saw them approach. "Ah, here they come."

Leliana smiled. "You made it. Chancellor Roderick, this is -"

"I know who she is." The man sneered. "As grand chancellor of the Chantry, I hereby order you to take this criminal to Val Royeaux to face execution."

"Bite me." Sulana muttered under her breath. From the grin on Varric's face, he'd caught the remark.

"'Order me'? You are a glorified clerk. A bureaucrat." Cassandra stepped forward

"And you are a thug, but a thug who supposedly serves the Chantry."

"We serve the Most Holy, Chancellor, as you well know." Leliana stepped in before Cassandra could reach for a sword.

"Justinia is dead. We must elect a replacement, and obey her orders on the matter."

"Not sure if you noticed, but there is a great big hole in the sky crapping out demons. Isn't that a bit more pressing of an issue?" Sulana folded her arms.

"You brought this on us in the first place." Chancellor Roderick wagged a finger at her. "Call a retreat, Seeker. Our position here is hopeless."

"We can stop this before it's too late."

"How? You won't survive long enough to reach the temple, even with all your soldiers."

Cassandra and Leliana briefly argued over which route to take before they turned to her. Sulana blinked, and then shrugged. "I say we charge." Sulana set her hand on the hilt of her found sword. "I won't live long enough for your trial, so if we are going to do this, let's get it done." If she was going to die, it would be on her feet and fighting.

Cassandra nodded in response, and began making the preparations.

#

Sulana leaped down the stairs and used her shield as a battering ram to drive a demon back from one of the beleaguered soldiers. A moment later Cassandra stood at her back as the two of them made their way across the field to the rift. A few soldiers had rallied to the side of a man in fur lined armor, and had fought the demons to a standstill.

With them providing reinforcements, the demons were cut down. The rift sparked, and Sulana raised her hand to it, willing the magic once more. It pulsed, and closed, vanishing from the sky.

"Sealed, as before. You are becoming quite proficient at this." Solas nodded to her.

"Let's hope it works on the big one." Varric added.

"No kidding." Sulana turned to where the apparent leader of the soldiers was walking towards Cassandra.

"Lady Cassandra, you managed to close the rift? Well done."

"Do not congratulate me, Commander. This is the prisoner's doing."

He turned towards her, a bit of surprise on his face. "Is it? I hope they're right about you. We've lost a lot of people getting you here."

She glanced over her shoulder and saw soldiers tending to their fallen. "I intend to try my best."

"That's all we can ask." He nodded. "The way to the temple should be clear. Leliana will try to meet you there."

"Then we'd best move quickly. Give us time, Commander."

"Maker watch over you - for all our sakes."

#

Last time she'd seen images appearing in the air had involved a lot of purple berries. Maybe she was going to wake up and puke in Vathran's boots again. Or in his bedroll, that was a better option. No, dreams didn't usually result in bruises and broken ribs. She set her shield, blocking the shades from getting to the mage as he threw more spells at the pride demon.

"The rift."

She blinked, and then sent forth the energy at the rift. It disrupted the attack the demon had been gathering. The demon faltered. Sulana threw back her head and howled a war cry as she moved in to attack.

The demon fell. She moved towards the rift, said a quick prayer to Andruil, and focused energy through the mark. As the darkness closed around her, she saw the rift close.

#

Her eyes blinked open. For a few precious moments, it was all just a dream. And then she got her bearings. She started to sit up, and heard a gasp as an elven servant dropped her burden. "I didn't know you were awake, I swear."

Sulana swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Don't worry about it. I only -"

To her shock, the serving girl immediately fell to her knees and bowed her head. "I beg your forgiveness and your blessing. I am but a humble servant."

"No. No, don't do that." Sulana slid off the bed and caught the girl's arms, pulling her back to her feet.

"My lady?" The girl stared at her with wide eyes.

"Don't kneel." Sulana touched the girl's chin. "Ever." She smiled. "What's going on?"

"You are back in Haven, my lady." The girl wobbled a bit when Sulana let her go. "They say you saved us. The Breach stopped growing, just like the mark on your hand. It's all anyone has talked about for the last three days."

She glanced down at her hand. "Then the danger is over?"

"The Breach is still in the sky, but that's what they say." The girl looked over her shoulder. "I'm certain Lady Cassandra would want to know you've wakened. She said, 'at once'."

"And where is she?" Sulana looked down at the odd clothing she was wearing and began looking around for her armor.

"In the chantry, with the Lord Chancellor. 'At once,' she said." The girl practically fled.

Sulana glanced down at the armor. Someone had cleaned it. She put it on and stepped out of the building to find everyone standing around and staring. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and headed towards the Chantry.

#

She walked into an argument, and the man from the bridge ordering her arrest. Cassandra immediately told the templars to ignore him and leave.

"You walk a dangerous line, Seeker." The chancellor glared.

"The Breach is stable, but it is still a threat. I will not ignore it."

"I did what I could." Sulana shook her head. "And I think it just about killed me."

"Yet you live. A convenient result, insofar as you're concerned."

"Have a care, Chancellor. The Breach is not the only threat we face."

Leliana stepped into view. "Someone was behind the explosion at the Conclave. Someone Most Holy did not expect." Sulana shrugged, and stepped back a bit to enjoy the show. "Perhaps they died with the others - or have allies who yet live."

The look on Chancellor Fancy-Hat's face was great. "I am a suspect?"

"You, and many others."

"But not the prisoner?"

Cassandra spoke up. "I heard the voices in the temple. The Divine called to her for help."

"So her survival, that thing on her hand - all a coincidence?"

"Providence." Cassandra nodded. "The Maker sent her to us in our darkest hour."

Well, this was getting out of control quickly. "You really think your Maker would send someone like me?"

"The Maker does as He wills. It is not for me to say."

"Even if that means a Dalish elf is His chosen?"

"Humans are not the only people with an interest in the fate of the world."

"The Breach remains, and your mark is still our only hope of closing it." Leliana nodded to her.

"This is not for you to decide." The Chancellor made a dismissive gesture.

Cassandra slammed a book down on the wooden table. "You know what this is, Chancellor. A writ from the Divine, granting us the authority to act. As of this moment, I declare the Inquisition reborn." She advanced on the Chancellor. "We will close the Breach, we will find those responsible, and we will restore order. With or without your approval."

Without another word, the Chancellor fled the room. Sulana took a deep breath. Wow. This was... Wow. Leliana touched the book on the table. "This is the Divine's directive: rebuild the Inquisition of old. Find those who will stand against the chaos." Leliana looked up. "We aren't ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now now Chantry support."

Cassandra shook her head. "But we have no choice: we must act now." She turned to Sulana. "With you at our side."

"Sounds like you are going to have one hell of a fight on your hand to get order restored." Sulana smiled. "I'm in."

2. Chapter 2

"So, now that Cassandra's out of earshot, are you holding up alright?" Varric looked up at the young elven woman. She had a few scars on her face, and he could make out another on her arm, peeking out from under the armor. "I mean, you go from being the most wanted criminal in Thedas to joining the armies of the faithful. Most people would have spread that out over more than one day."

"Too many died on that mountain for me to be wasting time." She fiddled a bit with the armor, resettling it on her shoulders.

"'Bad for morale' would be an understatement. I still can't believe anyone was in there and lived." He turned to stare at the fire.

"You're still here too." She sat down next to him.

"I like to think I'm as selfish and irresponsible as the next guy, but this..." If he hadn't dawdled, he'd have been one of the people in there. Cassandra and Leliana as well. "Thousands of people died on that mountain. I was almost one of them. And now there's a hole in the sky. Even I can't walk away and just leave that to sort itself out."

She leaned back a little to look up at the swirling breach. "Punching it didn't work. Guess we need to come up with something else."

He chuckled. "You might want to consider running at the first opportunity. I've written enough tragedies to recognize where this is going. Heroes are everywhere. I've seen that. But the hole in the sky? That's beyond heroes. We're going to need a miracle."

"Think we can find one in the tavern?" She glanced up at him.

Varric smiled. "Worth a try."

#

"The Chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all." Solas nodded at her approach.

"With my cape fluttering in the wind? Maybe riding a dragon?" Sulana smiled.

"I would have suggested a griffon, but sadly, they're extinct." He gave her an appraising look. "Joke as you will, posturing is necessary." He walked over to where he could observe the Breach. "I've journeyed deep into the Fade in ancient ruins and battlefields to see the dreams of lost civilizations. I've watched as hosts of spirits clash to reenact the bloody past in ancient wars both famous and forgotten." He turned back to her. "Every great war has its heroes. I'm just curious what kind you'll be."

"I'm still trying to figure out how I became the hero of this story." She shook her head. "You're the one who figured out how to make the mark work." Sulana glanced down at her hand. "What did you mean by ruins and battlefields?"

"Any building strong enough to withstand the rigors of time has a history. Every battlefield is steeped in death. Both attract spirits. They press against the Veil, weakening the barrier between our worlds. When I dream in such places, I go deep into the Fade. I can find memories no other living being has ever seen."

"Wow." She chuckled. "Qui's gonna want to..." She trailed off, looking over the camp. She'd asked around, but had yet to find anyone who had seen Vathran or Quiyala since the explosion. She'd even tried tracking down Quiyala's qunari friend, only to learn he'd died up at the temple.

"Qui?"

"I didn't come to the Conclave alone." She sighed. "Quiyala was my clan's First. I was going to say she'd want to talk to you, but I think she died when..." Her eyes went towards the Breach. "Going that far into the Fade? She'd find it fascinating." She sighed. "She wouldn't be wrong, either. Sounds extraordinary."

"Thank you. It's not a common field of study, for obvious reasons. Not so flashy as throwing fire or lightning." He smiled. "The thrill of finding remnants of a thousand-year-old dream? I would not trade it for anything." His eyes went back to the Breach. "I will stay then, at least until the Breach has been closed."

"Was that in doubt?" She raised an eyebrow.

"I am an apostate surrounded by Chantry forces in the middle of a mage rebellion. Cassandra has been accommodating, but you understand my caution."

"Well, let me know if anyone gives you any shit." She shrugged. "And needs their face punched in or something."

"Thank you." He nodded to her. "For now, let us hope either the mages or templars have the power to seal the Breach."

"Crossing fingers and eyes." She nodded and started to walk away.

"Sulana?" She turned back towards him. Solas nodded to her. "I am sorry, about your friend."

"Me too."

#

"Does it trouble you?"

Sulana looked at her hand, then up at Cassandra. "I haven't decided yet."

"What's important is that your mark is now stable, as is the Breach." Cassandra nodded. "You've given us time, and Solas believes a second attempt might succeed - provided the mark has more power. The same level of power used to open the Breach in the first place. That is not easy to come by."

"Great." Sulana shrugged. "Well, this should be fun."

Cassandra led her into a makeshift war room. She gestured at the man they'd encountered on the mountain. "You've met Commander Cullen, leader of the Inquisition's forces."

He nodded to her. "It was only for a moment on the field. I'm pleased you survived."

She stared. "The Cullen?" She shook her head. "From Varric's book?"

Cullen's face looked momentarily startled. "Well yes and..." He shook his head. "Emphatically no."

"Heh." Sulana grinned. "This really is going to be fun."

Cassandra made a frustrated noise as she tried to get the conversation back on track. "This is Lady Josephine Montilyet, our ambassador and chief diplomat."

The woman in the lovely silk dress inclined her head towards Sulana. "Andaran atish'an."

"You speak elven?" Sulana blinked.

Josephine gave her a slightly apologetic smile. "You just heard the entirety of it, I'm afraid."

A small amount of reluctance was visible as Cassandra turned towards the last person in the room. "And of course you know Sister Leliana."

"My position here involves a degree of..." Leliana nodded.

"She is our spymaster."

"Yes. Tactfully put, Cassandra."

"Wow." Sulana shook her head. "Wow." She repeated before looking around at them. "Um..." She shrugged. "I am really confused now as to what I am doing in a room with you four, cause..." She let out a small laugh. "Wow."

"I mentioned that your mark needs more power to close the Breach for good." Cassandra folded her arms.

"Which means we much approach the rebel mages for help." Leliana nodded.

"And I still disagree." Cullen shook his head. "The templars could serve just as well."

"We need power, Commander." Cassandra's voice had the tone of someone having an argument for the dozenth time. "Enough magic poured into that mark -"

"Might destroy us all. Templars could suppress the Breach, weaken it so -"

"Pure speculation." Leliana shook her head.

"I was a templar. I know what they're capable of." Cullen met her stare with one of his own.

Josephine quickly stepped in to sooth things. "Unfortunately, neither group will even speak to us yet. The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition." She turned her eyes to Sulana. "And you, specifically."

"Is it the ears or just a general kind of thing?" Sulana raised an eyebrow.

"Some are calling you - a Dalish elf - the 'Herald of Andraste'. That frightens the Chantry." Josephine nodded. "The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harboring you."

Cassandra growled. "Chancellor Roderick's doing, no doubt."

"It limits our options." Josephine waved a pen as she spoke. "Approaching the mages or templars for help is currently out of the question."

"Just..." Sulana shook her head. "How am I the 'Herald of Andraste'?"

"People saw what you did at the temple, how you stopped the Breach from growing." Cassandra turned towards her. "They have also heard about the woman seen in the rift when we first found you. They believe that was Andraste."

"Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading -"

"Which we have not."

Leliana shot a glare at Cassandra. "The point is, everyone is talking about you."

"It's quite the title, isn't it?" Cullen sounded slightly amused. "How do you feel about that?"

"It's..." She shook her head. "A little unsettling."

"I'm sure the Chantry would agree." He smiled at her.

"People are desperate for a sign of hope. For some, you're that sign." Leliana clasped her hands behind her back.

Josephine sighed. "And to others, a symbol of everything that's gone wrong."

"I suppose it was too much to ask for things to be easy. Or at least straightforward." Sulana shrugged. "Well, whoever did that to the sky needs their head kicked in. So what do you need me to do?"

A small smile came to Leliana's face. "A Chantry cleric by the name of Mother Giselle has asked to speak to you. She is not far, and knows those involved far better than I. Her assistance could be invaluable."

"I was hoping for more hitting, less talking." Sulana nodded. "I'll

see what she has to say."

"You will find Mother Giselle tending to the wounded in the Hinterlands near Redcliffe." Leliana's lips twitched slightly.

"Look for other opportunities to expand the Inquisition's influence while you are there." Cullen rested his hands on the hilt of his sword.

"We need agents to extend our reach beyond this valley, and you're better suited than anyone to recruit them." Josephine shifted her writing board.

Cassandra nodded. "In the meantime, let's think of other options. I won't leave all this to the Herald."

#

Sulana hesitated a moment before matching her steps to Cassandra's. "Um..."

"Yes?" Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

"Will Mahariel be joining us at some point?" She raised an eyebrow hopefully, and then blinked when Cassandra's face fell. "What?"

"The news has not spread then." Cassandra sighed. "Brehan Mahariel was killed on a Warden mission nearly a month ago."

"I..." Sulana shook her head. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"As am I." Cassandra nodded. "He was a good friend."

#

Scout Harding meet them at the forward camp. "The Herald of Andraste. I've heard the stories. Everyone has. We know what you did at the Breach." The dwarven woman nodded to her. "It's odd for a Dalish elf to care what happens to anyone else, but you'll get no back talk here. That's a promise."

After a brief and slightly amusing exchange with Varric, Harding got down to business. "The situation's pretty dire." She gestured at a map. "We came to secure horses from Redcliffe's old horsemaster." She sighed. "I grew up here, and people always said that Dennet's herds were the strongest and fastest this side of the Frostbacks. But with the mage-templar fighting getting worse, we couldn't get to Dennet. Maker only knows if he's even still alive. Mother Giselle's at the crossroads helping refugees and the wounded. Our latest reports say that the war's spread there, too. Corporal Vale and our men are doing what they can to help protect the people, but they won't be able to hold out very long."

"Then I guess we better go back them up." Sulana nodded, resting a hand on the hilt of her sword.

"You best get going. No time to lose."

#

Solas and Cassandra both made token efforts to talk the mages and templars down. Sulana wasn't sure if both groups didn't hear, or just didn't care. She leaped over a wounded Inquisition soldier and brought her sword down on the templar attacking him before spinning and slamming her shield into a templar archer. Cassandra moved in next to her, taking the stunned archer down with a solid blow. With Solas's magic and Varric's crossbow backing them up, they dealt with the attackers readily.

Sulana cleaned her sword before putting it back in the scabbard, and took a look around. Solas moved to tend to the wounded, and people were starting to creep out of hiding places. It didn't take her long to locate Mother Giselle. The red and white robes did kind of stand out. She hung back a moment, watching the woman, and was pleasantly surprised to see that the woman appeared reasonable. With a shrug, she walked over.

It was clear Mother Giselle had made the decision to help even before they'd arrived. Sulana checked with Cassandra, and arranged for a couple soldiers to ensure Mother Giselle reached Haven safely. Then she started taking a look around the camp. The situation wasn't good.

"Food. Blankets. A healer. And an end to war." She glanced around at her companions. "That about cover it?"

"It would seem that way." Solas nodded.

"Well, we've got some hours yet until sunset." Sulana jerked her head towards the hills. "Guess we better get started."

#

"On the way to the Conclave, we were hunting. Vathran was normally a pretty good shot, but the deer switched directions and he missed by a couple inches. I was just starting to resign myself to another meal of dried rations when this lightning bolt hit the deer right out of the blue." Sulana made short work of butchering a ram while Solas did the same for another. "He jumps about twenty feet in the air, and we turn to see Qui there. She gives us this completely innocent look and says, 'huh. Strange weather patterns in Ferelden.'"

Varric chuckled. "Hawke tried to say the same thing about Kirkwall once, when he misjudged a spell and coated Aveline's armor with frost."

"She used the same line after I'd been messing with her and discovered all of my undergarments were just these frozen blocks of ice." She rose and went to the stream to wash her hands. "Getting into a prank war with a mage just never really ends well."

"That would depend entirely upon your viewpoint." Solas's lips twitched as he washed his own hands.

Sulana chuckled. "Says the mage." She shrugged. "I didn't learn, and messed with her again. She just gave this evil little smile, and I spend the next four days driving myself nuts trying to figure out how she'd retaliated that time." She felt a slight lump rise in her throat. "Turned out her vengeance was just amusing herself watching me poke my bedroll with a stick every night and sleeping with one eye

open."

"That's..." Varric snickered. "Strangely brilliant."

"It..." Cassandra gave Sulana a sympathetic look. "Leliana may be able to determine what happened to them. It is possible they left, believing you dead."

"Can't think they would." Sulana sighed. "Vathran, maybe. But I can't see Qui leaving with that many wounded around. She'd have wanted to help." She straightened. "That should be enough meat to last them a while, especially if they know how to dry it. Let's get these last couple down to the camp, and see if we can't find a couple more caches."

#

Sulana sighed down at the corpses. "Well, I think that takes care of the problem templars." She shook her head. "Still some mage asshats though. Maybe we'll get lucky, and they'll see reason."

Cassandra glared at the dead templars before nodding. "It looked as though they were coming from another direction. They must have some sort of sign to signal each other."

"Qui could detect when a lot of magic was being used." Sulana glanced at Solas. "If we get you close enough, think you can point us in the right direction?"

"I will certainly try." He nodded to her.

Varric put Bianca back in her harness. "Well, let's get moving."

"Right." Sulana nodded. "World's not going to save itself."

#

The mages were clearly unprepared for a frontal assault, which as far as Sulana was concerned just proved they really were stupid. The smart ones, it seemed, were all holed up in Redcliffe. They stripped the camp of what few supplies it had, and headed back. She stopped at a strange statue. "There are a lot of these."

"Avvar totems." Solas pointed at the markings. "I believe these tell of Bright-Axe and the Lady of the Skies."

"You can read Avvar?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Avvar totems are not a written language as most would consider." He traced some of the etchings. "Rather they use pictographs that correspond with their oral traditions. These markings would indicate the withdrawal of the Avvar from the plains to the mountains."

"Huh." Sulana looked them over. "Maybe make a note of the spot so we can come back later?"

"Of course." He nodded to her.

#

"Have you considered practice dummies made out of aurum?" Sulana shook her head at where Cassandra was brutalizing the practice field.

"That would be nice." The seeker sighed, and stepped away. "Did I do the right thing?" She glanced at Sulana. "What I have set in motion here could destroy everything I have revered my whole life." She shifted, and prepared another onslaught. "One day, they may write about me as a traitor, a madwoman, a fool. And they may be right."

Sulana picked up one of the practice swords, and gestured to a sparring circle. Cassandra nodded and joined her. "Faith is meant to be a guide. Where is yours leading you?"

Cassandra sent a swing that she parried neatly. "I believe you are innocent. I believe more is going on here than we can see. And I believe no one else cares to do anything about it. They will stand in the fire and complain that it is hot."

"Yeah, that sounds like people." Sulana sent a feint in low, but Cassandra was fast enough to counter.

"But is this the Maker's will? I can only guess." Cassandra closed, forcing Sulana back a step.

"Someone once told me that when you sort through all the fancy words, the Maker's will is that we all try to do as much good as possible." Sulana shifted, dodging the attack and rotating to prevent Cassandra from getting her into a corner. "So whether I'm this 'Herald' or not, there are people who need help."

A genuine smile came to Cassandra's face, though she didn't let up on her attack. "I think you were sent to help us. I hope you were."

"And what happens now?" Sulana parried, and then moved from defense to offense.

"Now we deal with the Chantry's panic over you before they do even more harm." Cassandra actually looked pleased when Sulana forced her to retreat a few steps. "Then we close the Breach. We are the only ones who can. After that, we find out who is responsible for this chaos, and we end them." She shifted, parrying Sulana's next blow and lifting her sword before coming in underneath. Sulana rolled to the side to avoid what would have been a fatal strike on the battlefield, and came up with her sword still in hand. "And if there are consequences to be paid for what I have done, I pay them. I only pray the price is not too high."

"What choice was there?" Sulana brought her blade up, parrying Cassandra's next swing. "Only alternative I've seen anybody offer so far is stand there and wring their hands."

"My trainers always said, 'Cassandra, you are too brash. You must think before you act.'" Cassandra feinted. "I see what must be done, and I do it. I see no point in running around in circles like a dog chasing its tail." She stepped back, lowering her blade. "But I

misjudged you in the beginning, did I not? I thought the answer was before me, clear as day. I cannot afford to be so careless again."

"To be fair, in your boots I'd have suspected me too." Sulana nodded.

"I was determined to have someone answer for what happened. Anyone." Cassandra smile, and gave her a bow to signal the end of the match. They put the practice swords away, and Cassandra started to walk back to the main camp. She stopped, and turned back to Sulana. "You've said you believe you're chosen. Does that mean..." She tilted her head. "You believe in the Maker?"

She knew what answer was expected of her, a Dalish elf, with vallaslin honoring Andruil, the huntress. And then she shrugged, and told the simple truth. "I believe He exists."

"You do? I'm surprised, but..." Cassandra looked pleased at her response. "I suppose it's comforting. Surely the Maker put us both on this path for a reason. Now it simply remains to see where it leads us."

#

"You want me..." Sulana stared. "To go to Val Royeaux and talk to the clerics?" She pointed at herself. "Me. In Val Royeaux. Talking to the leadership of the Chantry. I think that might cause more problems than it solves."

"I agree." Cullen nodded. "It just lends credence to the idea that we should care what the Chantry says."

There was some more arguing, and it appeared she was being volunteered for the job whether she really wanted it or not. Though Cassandra was fast to volunteer to come with her, at least.

#

After some consideration, Sulana put aside the armor the Inquisition had provided and picked up the gear she'd brought with her. The Dalish style armor was oddly comforting, as she put it on. Since the ears were going to be noticed, she might as well make it clear they were not something worthy of shame.

#

"We say this is a false prophet." The mother glared down at her. "The Maker would send no elf in our hour of need."

"And yet it was elves that put an end to the last two Blights." Sulana drew herself up proudly. "We came here in peace, simply to talk -" She gestured. "And this is what you do? I implore you: let us sit down together, to deal with the real threat."

"It's true." Cassandra nodded. "The Inquisition seeks only to end this madness before it is too late."

"It is already too late." The mother pointed at where armed and armored men were approaching. "The templars have returned to the

Chantry. They will face this 'Inquisition,' and the people will be safe once more." The mother's smug face vanished when one of the newly arrived templars struck her in the back of the head, sending her to the ground.

One of the templars on the dais tried to step in, and the leader of those that had just arrived caught him. "Still yourself. She is beneath us."

Fury filled her, and for a moment she actually considered drawing her sword. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Her claim to 'authority' is an insult. Much like your own."

Cassandra tried to get the Lord Seeker to see reason, or at least talk, and he rebuffed her. Sulana shook her head, and looked at the men around him. Fully half of them looked ashamed or disturbed by what was happening. "Templars, one of your own commands the Inquisition's forces. Join us, as he did."

Lord Seeker Lucius scoffed. "A staunch and loyal member of the Order. So loyal, he abandoned them for a false Herald."

"But Lord Seeker..." The templar that had tried to step in earlier spoke up. "What if she really was sent by the Maker? What if -"

"You are called to a higher purpose. Do not question." The man that had struck the mother glared.

Lucius drew himself up to his full height. "I will make the Templar Order a power that stands along against the Void. We deserve recognition. Independence." He turned back to stare at Sulana. "You have shown me nothing, and the Inquisition..." He waved a hand. "Less than nothing. Templars. Val Royeaux is unworthy of our protection. We march."

She watched them walk away. Watched the ones who fell into step reluctantly. Watched the few who sent glances back over their shoulders. Then she shook her head. Varric came to stand next to her. "Charming fellow, isn't he?"

"Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?"

"Everything else has." Sulana nodded. "Well, at least we have a better idea of what flavor of trouble we are in."

#

She checked on the mother before leaving. The woman would suffer no lasting physical damage from the blow. As for the rest, time would tell. At least one person in Val Royeaux was moved enough by what they had witnessed to offer help. She amended that to two as they gathered some red scarves, and then three as she received an invitation to some enchanter party.

Four she really didn't see coming. "If I might have a moment of your time?" An elf in mage robes stepped out of the shadows.

Cassandra blinked. "Grand Enchanter Fiona?"

"Leader of the mage rebellion." Solas gave her an odd look. "Is it not dangerous for you to be here?"

"I heard of this gathering, and I wanted to see the fabled Herald of Andraste with my own eyes." It didn't take long for Fiona to get to the point. She wanted the Inquisition to come to the mages for help. Sulana tried to bite down on her irritation. The mages didn't want to come to the Inquisition to help, they wanted the Inquisition to come and ask. She watched the woman walk away.

"Come." Cassandra shook her head. "Let us return to Haven."

#

"It's the Inquisition's Herald." Someone shouted before shooting an arrow at her.

She caught it on her shield. "Well, they know who I work for at least." Sulana grinned. She did rather feel like hitting someone, and here was a volunteer.

#

"Herald of Andraste. How much did you expend to discover me? It must have weakened the Inquisition immeasurably."

Sulana exchanged a glance with Varric, and he gave her a confused shrug. She returned it before looking back at the man. "I don't know who you are."

And it looked like that hurt his feelings. He was giving a rather melodramatic speech when someone killed his bodyguard. An elven woman drew back her bow. "Just say 'what'."

"What is the -" The man went down heavily as an arrow got him right between the eyes.

"Eww." The newcomer walked over to the corpse. "Squishy one, but you heard me, right? 'Just say "what"'. Rich tits always try for more than they deserve." She retrieved her arrow. "Blah blah blah. Obey me. Arrow in my face." She stood again. "So, you followed the notes well enough. Glad to see you're..." An annoyed look came over her face. "Aaaand, you're an elf. Well, hope you're not 'too elfy.' I mean, it's all good, innit? The important thing is: you glow. You're the Herald thingy?"

Sulana turned towards Varric. "I think we took a wrong turn at that last alley. This one's already full up on crazy." She shook her head and looked back at the newcomer. "Glowing is one of my many talents. What's going on?"

"No idea. I don't know this idiot from manners. My people just said the Inquisition should look at him."

"Right."

"Name's Sera." She pointed at some crates. "This is cover. Get round it." When Sulana raised an eyebrow, Sera shrugged. "For the reinforcements. Don't worry. Someone tipped me their equipment shed."

She snickered. "They've got no breeches."

#

"Most people..." Sulana laughed softly. "Would have taken their weapons. Nice one." She nodded to Sera.

"So, Herald of Andraste. You're a strange one. I'd like to join."

"Then I'm going to require something at least vaguely resembling an explanation. Who are you people?"

"I'm not 'people', but I get what you want. It's like this. I sent you a note to look for hidden stuff by my friends. The Friends of Red Jenny. That's me. Well, I'm one. So is a fence in Montfort, some woman in Kirkwall. There were three in Starkhaven. Brothers or something. It's just a name, yeah? It lets little people, 'Friends,' be part of something while they stick it to nobles they hate. So here, in your face, I'm Sera. 'The Friends of Red Jenny' are sort of out there. I used them to help you. Plus arrows."

"Makes sense." Sulana nodded.

"It does?" Cassandra glanced at her. "How?"

"Arrows. You stick the pointed end in bad guys." Sulana shrugged, and turned back to Sera. "Alright, Sera, we can use you and your 'Friends'."

"Yes." Sera grinned. "Get in good before you're too big to like. That'll keep your breeches where they should be. Plus extra breeches, because I have all these..." She gestured at a sack. "You have merchants who buy that pish, yeah? Got to be worth something. Anyway, Haven. See you there, Herald. This will be grand."

#

Sulana tried not to laugh as the mage sent the marquis scurrying out with his tail between his legs. The man might have been better off if she'd stepped outside for a duel and just killed him.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vivienne, First Enchanter of Montsimmard and Enchantress to the Imperial Court."

"You've got a way with words, Lady Vivienne." Sulana smiled. "That may have been the funniest thing I've seen all week."

"Ah, but I didn't invite you to the chateau for pleasantries. With Divine Justinia dead, the Chantry is in shambles. Only the Inquisition might restore sanity and order to our frightened people. As leader of the last loyal mages of Thedas, I feel it is only right that I lend my assistance to your cause."

Well, they did need mages. And this one saw the sense of things. "The Inquisition will be happy to have you, Lady Vivienne."

"Great things are beginning, my dear. I can promise you that."

3. Chapter 3

"It's good you've returned. We heard of your encounter." Josephine greeted them with a worried look. Leliana's agents had apparently sent word ahead.

Cullen shook his head. "It's a shame the templars have abandoned their senses as well as the capital."

"We've a better idea of how much trouble we're in." Sulana sighed. "And there are a few trails blazed for us, I suppose." She frowned. "May be worth investigating the templars. What happened didn't seem to sit well with a lot of them."

"I agree." Cassandra nodded. "What could the Lord Seeker be up to?"

"We shouldn't discount Redcliffe." Josephine fiddled with her pin. "The mages may be worth the risk."

"They are powerful, Ambassador, but more desperate than you realize." Cassandra sighed.

"Fiona went to Val Royeaux." Sulana folded her arms. "Seems to me coming here would have been easier. And smarter." She folded her arms. "Feels like we are hunting bronto while there are wolves in the long grass. And I'd rather be hunter than prey. We need more arrows."

"True enough." Cullen nodded to her. "Right now, I'm not certain we have enough influence to approach the Order safely."

"Then the Inquisition needs agents in more places. That's something you can help with."

Josephine nodded. "In the meantime, we should consider other options."

"And food." Sulana nodded. "We should definitely consider food."

#

"There is one other matter." She turned to see Leliana had followed her instead of going with the other members of the war council. "The Grey Wardens of Ferelden have vanished. I sent word to those in Orlais, but they have also disappeared. Ordinarily, I wouldn't even consider the idea they're involved in all this, but the timing is..." Leliana shrugged. "Curious."

"The fact that you're the one needing to ask..." Leliana had been friends with some of the Ferelden wardens. Stories put her at the final fight with the archdemon, even. If she didn't know what was going on...

"The others have disregarded my suspicion, but I cannot ignore it." Leliana nodded. "Two days ago, my agents in the Hinterlands heard news of a Grey Warden by the name of Blackwall. If you have the opportunity, please seek him out. Perhaps he can put my mind at ease."

"What if he can't?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Then there may be more going on than we thought." Leliana narrowed her eyes.

"Well, we needed to get back to the Hinterlands anyway. Need to check on those towers and there was something about possessed wolves or something." Sulana nodded. "And bandits. And some sort of Veil artifact thingy Solas mentioned. And..." She shrugged and glanced at Josephine's office. "Think I could requisition a scribe or something to keep track of all this?"

#

"I should like to know if anyone here has treated you unkindly, Herald. For being an elf." Josephine gave her a concerned look.

Sulana smirked. "Eh, couple whispers and sideways looks. Broke a guy's wrist a few days ago and that did it for anything else."

Josephine gave her a startled look. "I shall speak with the staff regarding such conduct. If we're to convince the world that Andraste's Herald is an elf, the Inquisition must give you its utmost support. Stories of 'wild Dalish elves' have grown even more outrageous as people learn of you."

"Now that's a problem." She shook her head. "Not for me, I've got a sword. But I ain't the only elf here, and the folks that talk that shit are usually the first to take a knife to somebody with pointed ears." She shook her head. "My clan's defended ourselves against that more times than I can count. And I'm not going to let any of the elves here suffer it either."

"Really? I..." Josephine paled slightly. "Had no idea. I will do what I can to end the slander, Herald." She glanced down at the parchment in front of her before looking back up. "It may help if I know more about how you and your clan lived."

"The human towns we traded with ate the same food and suffered the same weather we did. We just did it in a landship, instead of a house."

"That..." Josephine shook her head. "Must have been difficult."

"Why?"

Josephine blinked. "Er..." She frowned slightly. "Why?"

"I've seen the moon rise from Rialto Bay and set in the Hundred Pillars. Hunted shadowcats in the Planasene forest and swamp lions in the Minanter river. Stars falling from the sky above the White Spire, and the black halla of Arlathan forest." She spread her hands. "And I know humans who've never been ten miles from the place of their birth."

"Still, you must miss your clan."

"I said my goodbyes before I left." She shrugged. "I think the Keeper knew I wasn't coming back. I wanted my own life."

"If I have learned one thing, it's that our lives are never entirely our own. Whether you're with them or not, being the clan of the Herald of Andraste will mark them in history."

"Hopefully, Leliana's people will be able to get a message to them to warn them about that." She sighed. "There have been other elves close to Andraste. Like Shartan. He led an army of them in her name."

"That is true." Josephine tapped the end of her pen against her chin. "I'd forgotten. The Chantry's not fond of Shartan. Perhaps we should draw parallels. Hint that Andraste's favor has returned to an elf in our time of need..."

"And the last two Blights were ended by elves." Sulana nodded. "I don't suppose..." She gave Josephine a hopeful look. "Any word about Vathran and Quiyala?"

"No elves matching those descriptions were seen following the Conclave."

"You'll let me know if you do hear anything, right?"

"Of course."

#

"Iron Bull?" She raised an eyebrow at the young man in front of her. His accent was unfamiliar. "Well, we could always use more soldiers. I'll take a look."

#

"How come you haven't disappeared like the other Wardens?" She raised an eyebrow at the man in front of her, and fought the urge to rub at her chin. His beard rivaled that of some of the dwarves she'd known. Looked like someone had glued a squirrel to his face.

"Well, maybe I was going to." He shrugged. "Or maybe there's a new directive, but a runner got lost or something. My job was to recruit on my own. Planned to stay that way for months. Years."

"Right." She shook her head. "Well, thanks. I guess we'll let you get back to..." She looked down at the dead bandits. "You do this a lot?" She gestured.

"These idiots forced this fight, so I 'conscripted' their victims. They had to do what I said, so I told them to stand. Next time they won't need me." His face softened a little. "Grey Wardens can inspire, make you better than you think you are."

"Can't argue with that." She smiled. "Well, it's been a pleasure." She pointed. "We've got a camp over that way, if you think of anything."

"Hold a moment." He folded his arms. "The Divine is dead, and the sky

is torn. Events like these, thinking we're absent is almost as bad as thinking we're involved. If you're trying to put things right, maybe you need a Warden. Maybe you need me."

Sulana smiled. "Yeah, like I'm going to turn that offer down." She stuck out her hand. "Welcome to the Inquisition, Warden Blackwall."

#

"They really were demonic wolves." Sulana sheathed her sword, and picked up the amulet the demon had dropped.

"Cause the teeth weren't scary enough." Sera spat.

"We encountered a possessed bear once." Sulana shook her head at the memory. "Took a hundred and six arrows before that thing went down. And I thought bereskarn were bad." She shook her head, and then glanced at Solas. "Do bereskarn ever get possessed?"

"Oy, did not need that image." Sera shook her head.

#

"But how can you steer properly with one of those things?" She gestured.

"The bridle is for steering." Cassandra shook her head. "The saddle is for stability."

"Not entirely true." Blackwall pointed. "You use your knees for more subtle guidance."

"You can't." Sulana shook her head. "The saddle gets in the way."

"Look, try to joust without stirrups, and you'll slide off halfway through the tilt." Blackwall gestured as he spoke.

"Jousting. What kind of combat is that? Running at each other in straight lines." Sulana shook her head. "Half of those idiots have to blindfold their horses because the horses are smarter than they are. I could ride circles around them on a halla."

"Jousting is a game, not a battle." Varric shrugged.

"No, 'ring the Dread Wolf' is a game."

"Excuse me?" Solas raised an eyebrow at her.

"Oh. That's where you throw these woven willow circles and try to get them around the neck of Fen'Harel's statue. You have to take a drink every time you get one. Loser has to clean up the mess the winners leave. The real challenge was playing without..." She caught the look on Solas's face, and trailed off for a moment before continuing. "Without the Keeper catching us. Ir abelas, hahren."

#

"Leandra just sort of sighed, and the next thing we know the Prince

of Starkhaven and the Guard Captain of Kirkwall are washing the windows while Hawke and I are scrubbing the staircase." Varric spread his hands.

"We were up near the Antivan border and ended up crossing paths with this family of refugees. The two hunters I was with and the couple men among the family start waving their weapons at each other. And this little gray haired old woman plants herself right in the middle. She yells at her sons to show some respect because they are in our territory, and then..." Sulana smiled at the memory. "She turns towards Athran, takes one look at his sword, and starts lecturing him on the importance of maintaining your weapon. Ten minutes later, we've helped pull her wagon out of the mud and are walking back to the aravels with no idea what just happened."

"That's how the Chantry became so powerful." Varric nodded. "Mothers."

"I know. I..." She stood up in the saddle and waved. "Look, there's Harding."

#

It was pretty clear how the leader of the Chargers had gotten his name. Damn, but he was even bigger than Qui's friend. She drew her own blade, gutting a fellow who ran at her while waving a sword, and gestured for the rest of her companions to go help the Chargers finish up. The fight was done almost before Sera could get her third arrow notched.

"Chargers, stand down." The big man gestured. "Krem, how'd we do?"

"Five or six wounded, chief. No dead."

"That's what I like to hear. Let the throatcutters finish up, then break out the casks." He nodded to her. "So you're with the Inquisition, huh? Glad you can make it. Come on, have a seat. Drinks are coming."

A rousing fight and a drink on the beach. The Chargers led the good life. "Nicely done. I hear you're looking for work?"

"I am. Not before my drink, though." He gave a few instructions to the man who appeared to be his second in command. And they gave each other some shit. Then he looked back at her. "So..." He sat on a rock, which brought him to about eye level with her. "You've seen us fight. We're expensive, but we're worth it..." He waved a hand. "And I'm sure the Inquisition can afford us."

Sulana stepped over a dead guy in Tevinter style armor, and looked around at the mercenaries. She spotted another wearing Dalish markings. A couple other elves. A dwarf. Led by a qunari. A nicely mixed company. "They seem to know what they're doing, I'll give you that."

"They do. But you're not just getting the boys. You're getting me." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "You need a frontline bodyguard, I'm your man. Whatever it is - demons, dragons? The bigger the better." He stood, demonstrating once again that he was almost two

feet taller than she was. "And there's one other thing. Might be useful, might piss you off. Ever hear of the Ben-Hassrath?"

Vathran had gone on about them to Qui when he'd found out about her qunari friend. "The Qunari city watch, or what not?"

"I'd go closer to 'spies,' but yeah, that's them." He nodded. "Or well, us. The Ben-Hassrath are concerned about the Breach. Magic out of control like that could cause trouble everywhere. I've been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and send reports on what's happening. But I also get reports from Ben-Hassrath agents all over Orlais. You sign me on, I'll share them with your people."

"What's in these Ben-Hassrath reports you're offering to share?" She folded her arms.

"Enemy movements, suspicious activity, intriguing gossip. It's a bit of everything." He waved a hand. "Alone, they're not much. But if your spymaster is worth a damn, she'll put 'em to good use."

Leliana was definitely worth a damn. "She?"

He chuckled. "I did a little research. Plus, I've always had a weakness for redheads." His eyes flicked briefly to her hair.

She smirked. "What are you drinking?"

He glanced at the casks. "Amaranthine ale."

"Good choice." She smiled. "You're hired."

"Excellent." He turned towards his people. "Krem, tell the men to finish drinking on the road. The Chargers just got hired." He and Krem gave each other a bit more shit before he glanced back at her. "We'll meet you back at Haven."

Sulana watched him go. Well, at least the view at Haven was going to be nice.

#

"So I kill your boss..." She gave the man in front of her a confused look. "And now you work for me?"

"The man was a bastard." The 'Blade of Hessarian' nodded. "You're not the first to stand up to him. You're just the first to win, and we're happy with that." He bowed again. "Besides, I would rather swear my life to the Herald of Andraste."

She looked down at the necklace thing she'd put together, and then looked back at Cassandra. "So if I stab the Lord Seeker, does that put me in charge of the templars?"

"No." Cassandra shook her head, and started walking out of the encampment.

"What if I stab Fiona?" She rushed to catch up with her. "Or the Archon? Or -"

#

"We get elves from the cities sometimes, coming to seek the Dalish." Sulana fell into step beside Solas. "And I've visited a couple towns and talked with elves there. Most of them get one look at the vallaslin and are either scared of me or falling all over themselves to ask questions. Sometimes really weird ones." She glanced at him.

"Was there a question in that?" Solas raised an eyebrow at her.

"Nah, more of an observation. It feels strange being the one wanting to ask the questions." She chuckled before asking him a few questions about the Fade and spirits, then mulled over the answers. Then she shook her head. "Is there a way to..." She shrugged. "I dunno, some spell or something where you could wiggle your fingers, glow a bit, and turn them back into spirits? Send them back into the Fade?"

"While in theory it is possible, it would not be a simple matter."

"So not an option for the battlefield." She sighed. "Qui'd talk about spirits sometimes. And she summoned this little one once, a wisp, to help us find our way through a fog." She shook her head. "Vathran got all mad about it, but..." She shrugged. "It helped. I told it thank you, mostly to annoy Vathran, and it made this adorable little chiming sound. Kinda don't like the notion it might have ended up one of those shades we fought."

"Sadly, a spirit that small would likely not have survived an encounter with a rift."

"Well..." Sulana sighed. "Shit. Guess we can add that to reasons to kick the ass of whoever did this."

"Yes." Solas nodded.

#

"Biggest problem for the Inquisition right now isn't on the front line." Iron Bull looked down at where the soldiers were practicing. "It's at the top. You've got no leader. No Inquisitor."

"Maybe I should take the job." Sulana shrugged.

"You?" He grunted. "Why you?"

"Nobody else is volunteering. And this thing on my hand means I'm here for the duration anyway. If it proves necessary to have an Inquisitor, well..." She shrugged. "I could handle it."

He grunted again. "For a second there, you sounded like a Qunari. My people don't pick leaders from the strongest, or the smartest, or even the most talented. We pick the ones willing to make the hard decisions..." He glanced at her. "And live with the consequences." He shrugged. "Ah, who knows. Maybe you seal the Breach, the Chantry gets off its ass, and all those soldiers go home and get fat."

"And then the elves will rule Orlais, the whole of Tevinter will join the Qun, and Starkhaven will learn the difference between beer and horse piss."

He laughed.

#

"I don't have a problem with you killing the guy..." Sulana shook her head at Leliana. "I do have a problem with you murdering him. Ideals are..." She sighed. "We don't have much else at the moment."

"You feel very strongly about this."

"Yeah." Sulana nodded. "I do. You and Cassandra..." She took a deep breath. "This is about setting things right, making the world a better place. It stops being that, well..." She folded her arms. "Maybe it's time we started learning from history, instead of repeating it."

#

"So what do you think of elven culture?"

"I would have thought you would be more interested in sharing your opinions of elven culture." Solas glanced at her. "You are Dalish, are you not?"

She frowned. "My people come from the elves who refused to surrender when humans broke their treaty and destroyed the Dales."

"Your Keeper was not wrong about that, at least." He spread his hands. "We must mark the occasion of the Dalish remembering something correctly. Perhaps we should plant a tree."

"I'm not sure what I said..." She narrowed her eyes. "But I don't think I deserved that. If you want me to leave you alone, just say it. And I will."

"Ir abelas..." He sighed. "Da'len. You are correct. I should not have directed my ire at you." He inclined his head. "If I can offer any understanding, you have but to ask."

"I just..." She shrugged. "Well, you mentioned something about seeing the history of a place by sleeping there. I was just wondering what you could tell me about elves from..." She waved a hand. "Way back when some of those really old ruins were built."

"The Dalish strive to remember Halamshiral, but Halamshiral was merely a fumbling attempt to recreate a forgotten land."

Sulana smiled as she listened to him talk about the ancient empire.

#

"Nobles." Sulana stared at Josephine. "Your idea for getting into the templars is to bring a bunch of nobles with us?"

"Well..." Josephine nodded. "Yes?"

"Are we loading them into trebuchets?"

Cassandra tried not to laugh. Cullen wasn't quite as successful. "Not the worst idea I've ever heard."

#

"Lady..." Sulana tilted her head. "Or is it Grand Enchanter?"

"You may call me Vivienne, or Madame de Fer." Vivienne nodded to her.

"Madame de Fer..." Sulana grinned. "Oh, I like that one. Someone told me you'd arrived. Thought I'd say hi. So, hi."

"Aren't you darling?" Vivienne inclined her head graciously.

"So um..." She took a deep breath. "Okay, this is going to be a bit awkward but..." She gave Vivienne a hopeful look. "Josephine's arranging a meet that is going to involve a lot of nobles, and I was kind of wondering if you'd..." She let out the deep breath. "They're all expecting a Herald. Any chance you've got some time to help me figure out how to look the part?"

Vivienne smiled.

End
file.